AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

The following listing of claims will replace all prior versions and listings of claims in the application.

LISTING OF CLAIMS

1. (Currently Amended) A method for customers to communicate with and pay a utility for at least one utility service, said method comprising the steps of: establishing a customer account with said customer, said customer account including a billing method and a payment method; providing a communication system comprising a utility host, a customer interface, and a control assembly programmed to control said utility service ~~and communication between said utility host and said customer interface~~; and communicating payment information to and from said customer using said communication system to complete payment of at least a portion of a customer balance on said customer account in accordance with said billing method and said payment method, said communication system having no dedicated wiring between said customer interface and said control assembly.

2. (Original) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of communicating customer account and utility service information to and from said customer using said communication system.

3. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 2, wherein said customer account and utility service information comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of automatic meter reads, outage/restoral monitoring, customer consumption readings, Time-Of-Use (TOU) reporting, billing capability, tamper detections/deterrence, deferment of peak use through TOU rate information, Real Time Pricing (RTP),

headline/local news, financial quotes, energy information, home monitoring, and appliance control.

4. (Original) The method of claim 3, wherein said customer account and utility service information is provided as customized or pre-defined messages to particular customer accounts.

5. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of disconnecting and/or reconnecting said utility service using said communication system based upon a comparison of said customer account with said payment information.

6. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of managing a [[the]] transfer of said utility service to a new customer or between customers using said communication system.

7. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of providing customer account usage information for said utility service using said communication system.

8. (Original) The method of claim 7, wherein said customer account usage information comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of amount used, amount remaining, rate of utility service usage, rate of charge, money used today, money used yesterday, money used this month, and utility service usage over the past twelve months.

9. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1, wherein said billing method comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of time based billing, fixed payment based billing pilling, and[[or]] prepayment billing.

10. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein said payment method comprises

one or more selected from the group consisting of direct debit, pre-authorized direct debit, credit card charging, cash payment, check payment, and debt management.

11. (Original) The method of claim 10, wherein said debt management includes a postpayment mode and a prepayment mode.

12-15. (Canceled).

16. (Currently Amended) A communication system for customers to communicate with and pay a utility for at least one utility service comprising: a utility host programmed to store a customer account for said customer, said customer account including a billing method and a payment method; a customer interface to communicate payment information to and from said customer to complete payment of at least a portion of a customer balance on said customer account in accordance with said billing method and said payment method; and a control assembly in communication with said utility host and said customer interface, said control assembly being programmed to control said utility service; said communication system having no dedicated wiring between said customer interface and said control assembly.

17. (Original) The system of claim 16, wherein said communication system is programmed to communicate customer account and utility service information to and from said customer.

18. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 17, wherein said customer account and utility service information comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of automatic meter reads, outage/restoral monitoring, customer consumption readings, Time-Of-Use (TOU) reporting, billing capability, tamper detections/deterrence, deferment of peak use through TOU rate information, Real Time Pricing (RTP),

headline/local news, financial quotes, energy information, home monitoring, and appliance control.

19. (Original) The system of claim 18, wherein said customer account and utility service information is provided as customized or pre-defined messages to particular customer accounts.

20. (Original) The system of claim 16, wherein said control assembly is programmed to disconnect and/or reconnect said utility service based upon a comparison of said customer account with said payment information.

21. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 16, wherein said communication system is programmed to manage a [[the]] transfer of said utility service to a new customer or between customers.

22. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 16, wherein said communication system is programmed to provide customer account usage information for said utility service using said communication system.

23. (Original) The system of claim 22, wherein said customer account usage information comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of amount used, amount remaining, rate of utility service usage, rate of charge, money used today, money used yesterday, money used this month, and utility service usage over the past twelve months.

24. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 16, wherein said billing method comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of time based billing, fixed payment based billing pilling, and[[or]] prepayment billing.

25. (Original) The system of claim 16, wherein said payment method comprises

one or more selected from the group consisting of direct debit, pre-authorized direct debit, credit card charging, cash payment, check payment, and debt management.

26. (Original) The system of claim 25, wherein said debt management includes a postpayment mode and a prepayment mode.

27. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 16, ~~wherein said customer interface is in power line communication with said control assembly~~ further comprising a smart card reader for reading a smart card storing said payment information.

28. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 16, wherein said billing method includes a rate schedule.

29. (Original) The system of claim 16, wherein said payment information is communicated in accordance with a payment cycle.

30. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 29 ~~claim 16~~, wherein said payment cycle supports one or more parameters selected from the group consisting of a billing date, a payment period, a past due period, and a disconnect point.

31. (Original) The system of claim 16, wherein said utility host comprises a computer running application software.

32. (Original) The system of claim 16, wherein said customer interface comprises an LCD display, navigation push-buttons, a numeric keypad, and multi-colored LED's.

33. (Original) The system of claim 16, wherein said control assembly comprises a power switch, control electronics programmed to complete usage calculations and external communications, and a transceiver for communicating with said utility host.

34. (Currently Amended) A communication system for customers to remotely communicate with and pay a utility for at least one utility service comprising a customer

control system at a location remote from said utility, a[[said]] customer interface being programmed to communicate payment information to and from said customer to complete payment of at least a portion of a customer balance on a customer account in accordance with a billing method and a payment method stored at said utility; and a control assembly to control said utility service to said customer; said communication system having no dedicated wiring between said customer interface and said control assembly.

35. (New) A communication system for a prepaid utility service, the system comprising a utility host for managing a customer account, a customer interface for displaying information regarding the customer account, and a control assembly for controlling the utility service, the utility host configured for communicating with the customer interface and with the control assembly, the communication system having no dedicated wiring between the customer interface and the control assembly.

36. (New) The communication system of claim 35 wherein the customer interface is configured for communicating with the control assembly.

37. (New) The communication system of claim 36 wherein the customer interface is configured for communicating with the control assembly via a power line carrier.

38. (New) A method for communicating information relating to a utility service between a utility host, a customer interface, and a control assembly for said utility service, the method comprising:

determining an amount of prepaid service remaining in a customer account;

communicating the determined amount of prepaid service remaining in the
customer account from the utility host to the customer interface for display to the
customer; and

communicating a disconnect command from the utility host to the control
assembly when the amount of prepaid service in the customer account is exhausted.